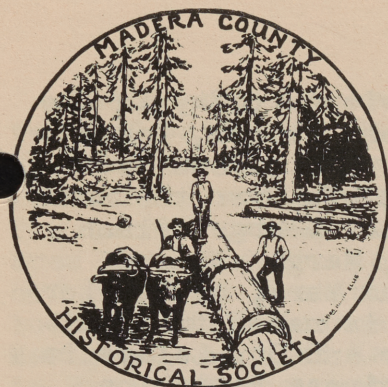


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THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

MADERA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

Volume II - Number 1

January, 1962

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON MORDECAI FAMILY

as related to NATHAN C. SWEET by LOUISE & BROOKE F. MORDECAI

George W. Mordecai's father was Augustus Mordecai, born October 5, 1806, at Warrenton, North Carolina. He married Rosina Ursula Young March 5, 1835, at Westbrook, Henrico County, Virginia. Rosina was born March 24, 1818, in Henrico County. Their home was called Rosewood and was four miles from Richmond, Virginia.

Augustus died at about forty years of age, leaving his wife with three little boys: William, John Brooke and George W., the youngest, born in 1844. All three boys joined the Confederate Army and lived through the war. George was seventeen when he enlisted, against the
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Above, we view "Refuge" where George W. Mordecai brought his bride, Louise Dixon, and together raised their family of five children.

EARLY FAMILIES OF MADERA COUNTY

When one meets an old timer and learns he or she knew some of your family, how rich you feel. You know that somehow, great good has come from the early settlers of our country, county and the West.

Not long ago, the history of our families was brought to mind when an old Madera Yosemite Hotel register, in the possession of Walter Williams (Whose own family dates back over one hundred years in the Santa Cruz area), showed the name of "G.W. Kenney, registered on a Tuesday, July 31, 1877, from the mountains." This name brought up comments and many historical facts connected with early families. Mr. W. Herman Glas (now deceased) spoke, "I knew Mr. Kenney very well and he was the father of George W. Kenney, present County Recorder." I told Mr. Glas that Mr. Kenney was my grandfather, as I was the eldest daughter of his son, Charles.

The early history of the family started when the senior Mr. & Mrs. Kenney and their three sons, George Walter, Edward and Frank came from Boston, Mass., and settled in the town of Montezuma, east of Modesto. They lived there until the young men started to find their places in other parts of the state. While living there, they became acquainted with the Charles Pinkey Garner family and the children all attended school together. Later, these families were to become related by marriage.

Young George Walter went to famed Yosemite Valley to work at the age of fifteen. Being used to handling stock, he and a young man named Ted Bedford purchased pack stock and took tourists over the trails in Yosemite Valley. They later secured buggies for sightseeing and took tourists to the beauty spots there. Mr. Bedford later sold to Mr. Kenney.

On June 18, 1874, Big Oak Flat Road was opened for travel to Yosemite Valley from Coulterville.

The old register viewed today in the Museum at Government Center, Yosemite, shows that on this joyous occasion, the first vehicle over the road that day brought Mr. George Wilson Coulter, his wife, Margaret, and daughter, Miss Anna Mary, of Coulterville. (The town is named for Coulter.) Mr. Coulter and Dr. Lafayette Bunnell of the Mariposa Battalion built the road, suffering many setbacks and late arrivals of money appropriations. At onetime, Mr. Coulter was president of the road.

It seems that Mr. Coulter was a very prominent person in the Mother Lode area, having started his first store there in a tent which proudly flew the American Flag on top. He befriended many who came to him, among whom was Major James D. Savage, whose trading post was on the Fresno River.

Coulter and Major Savage were in San Francisco together at the time the boat "Oregon" brought the news that our state was admitted to the Union on the ninth day of September, 1850, but not heard until the boat arrived on that day, October 28, 1850. The papers were carried in a little blue umbrella by a Miss Cosby, and it is on display in Sutter's Fort in Sacramento.

Miss Anna Mary Coulter met and married young George Walter Kenney and went to live in Yosemite Valley where Mr. Kenney and his new partner, John Coffman, operated the Coffman and Kenney Stables. They had buggies, pack stock and freight wagons. Everyday, about three in the afternoon, Mr. Kenney came near the William Sell Store and Sentinel Hotel and would line-up the tourist trips for the day.

The Kenneys had eight children, five girls and three boys. They built a large house at Kenneyville, the exact site of the present Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite Nat'l. Park.

The Kenney men married the daughters of Catherine Garner and William Willard Amer, living at Fresno Flats (Oakhurst) and Adobe Ranch, Madera. The Garner family had moved to this area from Modesto to reside in the old ranch at Eastin (the house remains today. Young George Kenney, born in Mariposa, married Katherine Amer, born in Fresno Flats, and have two children: Dr. Charles R. Kenney of San Jose and Mrs. Dorothy Jean Foust of Madera. Charles Kenney married Mildred Amer, born on Adobe Ranch, and have two daughters: Mrs. Catherine Anna Wade in Fresno and Mrs. Mildred Mannette Eaves of Madera.

At one time, Mildred and Catherine Amer operated a millinery store near the present "Maiden Lane" store today in Madera. Also, they helped their mother, Catherine, with the bakery, and owned the first ladies bicycle in Madera, giving lessons in riding it for 50¢ a lesson.

That old register shown that evening gave the names of the great and near great who traveled to the famed Valley. Two of the stage drivers of the first team stages were Judge Stanley Murray (retired) and the late Samuel Owens; freight team drivers were John Medina and Charles Schmidt, the father of Mrs. Jack (Lela) Murphy. Later, the Murray brothers, Clyde and Kryle, drove stage and could tell of many famous personages and stories of their experiences with the first automobiles, after leaving the train stop at Raymond for the trip to the Valley.

One of the famous orators of all time, William Jennings Bryan, spoke from the Yosemite Hotel where they had placed a platform at the edge of the street. There are many who have pictures of this occasion. In the pictures are the horse and buggies of the towns people, the late Dr. Mary Rutin (for whom the Madera Clinic is named), the Pettys, Desmonds, Butler and many of the families of the mem-

bers of our Historical Society.

All these people and many more have helped to make our county and city grow from that time of the riotous trip to Fresno by train to have the meeting from which our county was formed; even if they "laughingly" call us the "renegades of the north". Our official birthday is March 11, 1893. May the great heritage that our hardy settlers gave us be not destroyed, but, be handed to the future generations with a stronger firmness and the articles be preserved for all time in a museum.

Ho! for the Trails

OF THE YOSEMITE

To visit this Valley of Wonders without making at least one of its trail trips is like visiting Rome and not seeing St. Peters

We are ready to serve you with a carriage or saddle-train service that has few equals

Our trail Animals are Kind
and Gentle

Our Guides are Courteous
and Attentive

Commencing about the first of July we will make a specialty of personally conducted camping parties to the High Sierras.

For parties of four or more we will furnish saddle and pack-horses and guide for \$1.00 per day each, the parties furnishing their own blankets and provisions.

These trips will include any part of the mountains the parties desire to visit.

Geo. W. Kenney will be at the Sentinel Hotel every afternoon and evening.

COFFMAN & KENNEY

YOSEMITE, CALIFORNIA

This Coffman & Kenney advertisement comes from a 1905 edition of Foley's Yosemite Souvenir & Guide.

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON MORDECAI FAMILY (Continued)

advice of General Lee who felt that he was too young, but relented when he realized how eager the young applicant was. Those war years of worry were never forgotten by their mother.

After the War George spent a short time on the Cammeron Plantation near Raleigh, North Carolina, but was unhappy due to conditions caused by the aftermath of war. He decided to emigrate to California with a group of young men (all Confederate veterans), among whom were his cousin from Raleigh, Tom Devereaux, and the Pickens brothers. Coming by way of Panama, they settled in the San Joaquin Valley where government land could be obtained, each filing on 320 acres. This land lay to the south-west of the Mordecai Ranch.

George Mordecai enjoyed the pioneer life it was necessary to live

here in the Valley. His party arrived in 1867, before any large settlements had been made on the plains. The nearest post office was at Millerton, the county seat. He worked at freighting and with sheep and cattle for J.R. Jones who had a store and ferry across the San Joaquin River from where Friant is today. Later on he raised sheep on shares with Jones. Sheep raising was the prevailing livestock industry of the times in the Millerton area.

The Alabama Settlers arrived in 1868 and were the first large group to live on the plains south of the Merced River. In 1869, the Dixon family from Mississippi came to California. Richard Lawrence Dixon and his wife, Julia Rebecca Phillips Dixon, disgusted by the excesses of the so-called "Carpet Bagger" politicians who descended upon the South after the War, sold their comfortable
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Among these stately trees, we see the "Refuge" of today and the home of Louise Mordecai and Ethelfleda Labadie. Brooke F. Mordecai resides next door.



George Washington Mordecai, Sr., is seen above, working Durham cattle in the corral at "Refuge".

* * * * *
plantation home, The Sycamores, near Greenville; determined to make a new home in the San Joaquin Valley. They had six sons and one daughter, Louise, destined to become the wife of George Mordecai.

The older Dixon boys took up land in the area called the "Alabama Settlement" which lay between what is now Madera and the San Joaquin River and west along the north bank. They acquired a band of sheep and by June, 1870, the Fresno EXPOSITOR reported, "Dixon Brothers crossed at Jones Ferry, 4500 sheep".

The same year, Judge R.L. Dixon bought out a sea captain settler who had decided to return to the sea. This property had a good house on it for those days and the Judge brought his wife and daughter from San Francisco to make their home. It is where Brooke Mordecai and his sisters live today. This new home was named "Refuge" and a refuge it has proved to be.

* * * * *
The trip from San Francisco was made by boat to Stockton and then by horse-drawn vehicle to their destination. It was the last of May and that year the late rains had kept the country green and covered with wild flowers. The ladies felt that they were coming to a delightful spot. Later, when the heat and drought descended upon the treeless landscape, it was a severe test of courage. Wet sheets were hung in front of open windows to catch the breeze. But spirits were high and many of the settlers were young, unmarried men who, after a day of hard work, had the energy for pleasant social gatherings.

There was one tree at some distance from Refuge called the "Lone Cottonwood". Louise Dixon and an escort rode on horseback to get some mistletoe from its branches. The young man fell out of the tree and broke his arm. Louise had to get him home as best she could.

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON MORDECAI FAMILY (Continued)

The eldest Dixon son was Harry St. John. He was a lawyer and very soon after coming to Fresno County was elected County Clerk and Recorder. He formed a partnership with Wm. Faymonville, lawyer and ex-County Clerk and Recorder, in supplying land purchasers with abstracts of land titles.

On May 24, 1871, just a year after he had made "Refuge" his home, R. L. Dixon was admitted to practice law in California by certificate from the Court of Washington County, Mississippi, having practiced in that court since 1848. In early February, 1873, Harry Dixon and Faymonville opened an office in San Francisco at the Health office with R.L. Dixon in charge. So, only two years and a few months after settling in Fresno County, the Dixons returned to San Francisco. The San Francisco office was closed in March, 1874. That year was remembered by Louise as a period full of gaiety. In San Francisco, on February 14, 1874, Harry St. John Dixon wed Constance Maynard.

R.L. Dixon now became superintendent of the Buena Vista Ranch belonging to Carr and Haggin and known today as the Kern County Land Company. The Dixons, with Louise, became residents of Kern County. Later on, the third son, William L. Dixon, became a permanent employee of the Carr and Haggin outfit.

With the railroad having come to the San Joaquin Valley, travel was comparatively comfortable and distances shorter. The "No Fence" law made stock raising more difficult and grain farming subject to fewer hazards.

R.L. Dixon's second son, Edward T. Dixon, decided to give up farming and return to his first profession, acquired before coming to California, and opened a drugstore in Merced in partnership with Dr. Leach. The Doctor had become a staunch family

friend. Edward T. became Superintendent of Schools for Merced County in the "eighties".

During all these "comings and goings", a correspondence was maintained between Louise Dixon and George Mordecai which culminated in marriage at the Buena Vista Ranch on October 26, 1876. They were married by Bishop Kip, the first Episcopal Bishop of California. George Mordecai bought "Refuge" and other property from the Dixons, father and sons, and took his bride to live in the house which she had known as home six years earlier. Here their family was born, grew up, and still live eighty-six years later.

They had five children: George Washington Mordecai, Junior, deceased (survived by Violet Hodkin Mordecai); Louise Mordecai; Richard Lawrence Mordecai, deceased; Brooke Fisher Mordecai; and Ethelfleda Mordecai Labadie. Brooke F. Mordecai had four daughters: Caroline, deceased; Barbara, Eliza Brooke, Susan and five grandchildren.

George Mordecai developed "Refuge" as a stock and grain ranch. He specialized in sheep until 1911 when he changed to Durham cattle. He often rented additional range in the foothills. In the "nineties" he entered politics and represented his district in the state assembly. He lived until 1920 to become seventy-six years of age. His wife, Louise, died on April 21, 1929.

After the years spent at the Buena Vista Ranch, Judge R.L. Dixon opened a law office and spent the rest of his life in Fresno until his death, May 11, 1889. The Fresno Bar Association presented him with a gold-headed cane as a mark of appreciation for his services to that organization. Today his descendants, like so many other families, are scattered all over the United States.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT for 1961

All officers and directors were returned to office in the Society at the annual meeting held at Lucca's Restaurant, January, 1961.

The April meeting, also held at Lucca's Restaurant, was well attended. The speaker, Dr. Raymund F. Wood, discussed the "Cross on Table Mountain" with an interesting explanation of the geology of Table Mountain. A meeting was planned for June, but delays and final conflict with the annual meeting of the Conference of Historical Societies at Columbia, forced a cancellation.

The writer represented our Society at Columbia. Topic of the conference was the Civil War. The many papers presented can be found in the publications of the conference with which we are well supplied. The 1962 meeting of the conference is to be held at Pasadena in June and we hope that our Society will be well represented.

During the year, historical talks have been given to the Rotary Club of Madera, the Kiwanis Club of Merced, and at the annual meeting of the "Old Timer's Club" of Los Banos. Talks were presented two Sunday evenings during the summer at vesper services of the Community Church of Bass Lake.

Monthly exhibits were continued in the showcases at North Fork and Coarse Gold until July. In November, a nominating committee composed of Mrs. H. Clay Daulton, chairman, Mrs. Guy Crow, Miss Blanche Galloway, and Miss Naomi Heiskell was appointed.

The annual meeting was called, as provided in the by-laws, for the third Wednesday in January which fell on January 24, 1962. It was held at Lucca's Restaurant in Madera with an attendance of about thirty-five members and guests.

The secretary reported a membership of 109, and the treasurer, a balance in the bank of \$711.05. Report of the nominating committee was received and unanimously accepted. New officers are as follows:

President Maud Lindeman
Vice-President Walter Ficklin, Jr.
Secretary &
Treasurer Harry Vollborn
Directors Mildred Eaves,
Herbert Voight, Winnifred Pabst,
Agnes Bradford, Franklin Secara.

Speaker for the evening was Mrs. Doris Foster who reported on a History Meeting at San Miguel Mission that she and Mr. Foster attended. Her report will be presented in its entirety in a later issue of the HISTORIAN.

Respectfully submitted,

Nathan C. Sweet
President, 1961

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MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

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MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN is published quarterly in January, April, July and October by the Madera County Historical Society, P.O. Box 478, Madera, California. Subscription, 50¢ per copy, \$2.00 per year is included in membership in the society.

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